Small Black Box Re:port

RE:

Small Black Box #24
Sunday 25 May 2003, 7-10PM
Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, Theatre Space
Fortitude Valley, Brisbane Australia
SPECIAL SECOND ANNIVERSARY EVENT

Daryl Buckley (electric guitar and digital effects) & Michael Hewes (digital processing) performing Richard Barrett's scored composition "Transmissions".

Alan Nguyen (laptop)

Andrew Kettle with Helen Kettle (performance art) performing Andrew Kettle's "Sol's Violin"
(appearing on a fully-blacked out stage in blacks, with glow-in-the-dark symbols of the planets and other solar entities)

REPORT:

Daryl Buckley with Michael Hewes
"...tight, claustrophobic, gnawing hyper-gestures for electric guitar, foot pedals, controller boxers, feet, fingers, hands, eyes, score, you name it..."
"...flashes of brilliance, flickerings of feeling..."
"...radically controlled and contorted performance by Buckley..."

Alan Nguyen
"...energetic, ambient, atmospheric, pulsating, undulating, rich and raw - a fantasy of micro-drones..."
"...multi-layered hypnotic and ear-jarring beauty..."
"...a bold, soothing statement of glitches, buzzes, tones and audio scars..."

Andrew Kettle with Helen Kettle
"...a stripped-back super-quiet haunting ritual of cosmic proportions..."
"...an almost still-motion piece that held the audience in captive attention..."
"...a fitting second-anniversary present to Small Black Box from the original instigator himself, Kettle..."
"...cold sono-scientific calculations based on the movements of the planets, turned into cool performance art..."

The night ended with an emotive speech by Kettle thanking various SBB workers and audience for their support and encouragement of the last two years.

PORT:

The night made me think about polyphony and monophony. And how all the pieces had a type of in-built polyphony which came out as monophony. Paradoxically, the more polyphonic, the more it moved to monophony.

In the Barrett composition, electric guitarist Daryl Buckley is interpreting a visually polyphonic score via a bodily polyphony that borders on hyper-virtuosic, performed upon a polyphonic instrument (ie, the guitar can play more than one line at once), and is putting the guitar sounds through a polyphony of digital processing and effects units, and has extra electronic sounds played by sound-technician Michael Hewes added to the mix!... So I was imagining that the sounds we heard would be hyper-polyphonic, but it turned out rather the opposite. Indeed, there were many different sonic gestures/sonorities/textures in succession (juxtaposition) but not at the same time (superimposition). Certainly Barrett's work is the antithesis of drone music - which is a major trait of the noise/sound art scene - and is instead far closer to the modernist flow of short gestural material (like Berio's sequenzas, Donatoni's early solos,

Ferneyhough's "Unity Capsule" for flute). Something Barrett fully intends - he's definitely not a groover.

Next up we had Alan Nguyen perform on laptop (behind a table so we could not see him at all) calling up multi-layers of short glitchy, pulsy pre-records. A polyphonic hypnotic sound mass ensured, but it was abruptly and unexpectedly interrupted half-way through by a wall of white noise. After the initial audio shock, it struck me that white noise, whilst apparently all frequencies at once, is actually a very monophonic sound - not multi-layered but one layer. Here again, dense polyphony comes out as monophony.

And lastly Kettle's performance work was another example of hyper-polyphony leading to monophony. A precursor to his IMA installation (opening Thursday 31 July 2003) this is a data-mapping work transferring orbital data from solar bodies (such as angle and position in sky, and time of rise and fall of planets) into various sonic parameters (such as frequency, amplitude, fundamental pitch, overtones). Not a linear polyphony (many distinct lines at once) but a parametric polyphony (many distinct parameters of the one audio strand at once). And the effect was a slow, ever-shifting monophonic sounding sine-wave-like drone - the orbits of all the planets reduced to a single narrow audio band. Typical Kettle in terms of its quirky performance elements and drone-like elements (think back to his "Drone 9" and "Turing Test" performances in the late 1990s).

One wonders whether the opposite is also true, that a form of ultra monophony might lead to perceived polyphony?

This aside, congratulations Small Black Box on two years of innovative, curious and tantalising events that has supported and fostered a growing local and national community of musicians and sound artists.

REP (archetypal performance indicators):

Three archetypal modes of <u>visual performance activity</u>…
a. seen making the sounds (Buckley)
b. not seen making the sound (Nguyen)
c. seen doing something else beside making the sound (Kettle)

Three archetypal modes of <u>generating electronic sounds</u>…
a. making it on the spot (Buckley)
b. calling up pre-made sounds in a live fashion (Nguyen)
c. playing pre-made sounds (Kettle)

Small Black Box Re:port

RE:

Small Black Box #25
Sunday 29 June 2003, 7-10PM
Institute of Modern Art, Screening Room
Fortitude Valley, Brisbane Australia

Donna Hewitt (firstly live eMIC performance linked to laptop with PD software - for more info on her eMIC visit www.users.bigpond.net.au/donnahewitt/current.htm. Secondly a video work of sampled female speeches about pub abuse)

Will Guthrie (junk percussion with bought and home-made percussion, sticks, and vibrators acting as drone-agents)

Julian Knowles (laptop with various applications running simultaneously)

REPORT:

Donna Hewitt
"…her delicious voice transformed before us into shimmering electronica…"
"…the best sounding sounds to come out of the speakers at Small Black Box that I've heard in a long time; experimental music without experimental production…"
"…the feminine acoustic voice ported through the electronic phallic microphone into a rich ambient stratosphere…"

Will Guthrie
"…tinkering around on a few lose ends of industrial detritus like an audio prospector, searching out new and nuanced musics…"
"...Guthrie is a strong member of the junk improvising percussion club that is scattered across Australia…"
"…an intimate expose of percussive attacks and vibrator drones…"

Julian Knowles
"…rich sweeps and arcs of sound…"
"…Knowles induced a tantric audio experience, the walls vibrating behind us…"
"…the blue screen of death met head on with Knowles and I'm not sure who ended up the winner…"

PORT:

I was part of several conversations before, during and after this Small Black Box that were discussing the relationship between instrument-as-framework and sounds-as-content, and especially the relationship between who is the designer/author of the instrument and of the sounds.

Donna Hewitt's eMIC project shows off a current strength and weakness in current sound/digital/new media practice. Like many other artists interested in designing her own interfaces (rather than use generic mass-produced tools such as a standard microphone and effects unit) she has invested much time, money and emotional effort into creating a machine designed by and for her. New media and other arts funding find this a sexy proposition to support - which is very good thing, as artists working in this way add a lot to our culture and to the tools we use to create and manipulate culture.

But the "but" in all of this is that there is often so much time spend developing the new tool that often the content (in this case live electro-acoustic sound) has far less time, attention and energy put into it. And this often means an underutilisation of the tool the artist designed to greater utilise their own ideas/skills. (Like the story of a Brisbane artist who spent 10mins recording something that went into a $10,000 and ten-month-in-the-making artist-designed speaker system…!!!)

In Hewitt's case, this is was only the third time she performed with the eMIC, which is still in its prototype phase, so it will be interesting to see how far she takes it once her energy goes into performing and improvising with it (exploring its aesthetic capacities) rather than designing and building it (exploring its technical capabilities). And hopefully new media and other funding bodies realise this is just as important a step to fund. Though stuffing around with your instrument for 6 months seems at first less sexy and tangible than building the thing. Though it will more often than not produce a much better musical result in performance - that's the tangible result.

Will Guthrie is an example of a clear division between instrument designer and sound content maker. He either buys his percussion instruments (factory made) or gets a colleague to built items for him. In this way he is free to push the instrument into areas which even the instrument designer could not imagine it going.

Artists who design their own instruments may not themselves be able to realise its full sonic/performance potential, because they may well be too close emotionally and cognitively to the object (of their desire!). I wonder what would happen if Hewitt let another experimental vocalist loose her eMIC? How much more would they be able to extract from the instrument since they aren't emotionally attached to what it 'should' do? In any case, what is clear is that the mind-set of designing a tool is often very different from the mind-set of playing with the tool.

Julian Knowles, like Guthrie, uses pre-made bought tools (in this case software applications). It becomes a bit blurred, however, it determining what is tool/software design and what is sound design in the digital world, as they can merge into the same moment within the creative process. But in general, we could say that the noise/digital sound practice of the last 10 years (at least!) has ridden on the back of trying to break, abuse or general misuse software and electronics, taking standard musical tools into areas its was never intended to go by the market-driven manufacturers. (Lots of drum machines and beat-based application soften get used by drone/ambient noise artists, even though they weren't intentional designed to do that.)

So perhaps tool design is about MAKING, and sound design (of a noise-based artist) is about BREAKING.

And we can't break something before we make something. So the relationship between tool and sound designers will always exist and evolve. There just might be richer and more rewarding ways of structuring these relationships, if we think about it long enough… and try and fail and try and fail… and make and break and make and break……

REP (archetypal performance indicators):

Three archetypal modes of sound generation…
a. acoustic (Guthrie)
b. electro-acoustic (Hewitt)
c. digital (Knowles)

Three archetypal modes of instrument designer…
a. custom-made instrument by artist (Hewitt's eMIC)
b. custom-made instrument by someone else (Guthrie's metal collage drum)
c. mass-made instrument which can be customised (Knowles' laptop applications)

Three archetypal modes of video content…

a. video of compositional mechanics/score (Hewitt - she projected the PD program used in her laptop)
b. arbitrary video (Guthrie - he said he didn't know what video was playing behind him or who made it or chose it)
c. found video (Knowles - he just had the default blue screen of the video on)

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